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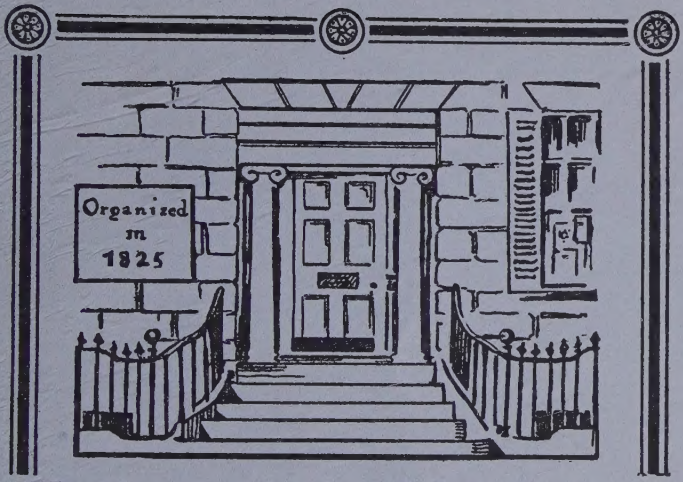

Unitarian Horizons

MAY 15, 1940

OVER-SIZE FLOWERPOTS

THE mail that comes to my desk is of almost infinite variety, and the temptation to use a letter as the basis for a sermon or an article is often irresistible. Strictly speaking, I suppose I ought always to ask the writer's permission before yielding to that temptation; but

when laziness prevents my doing so, I am apt to explain my neglect of the obvious courtesy by saying to myself that the desired permission would probably be refused through excessive modesty, which would be a very great pity!

So, without permission, but also without any very sharp twinge of conscience, I am going to share with my readers a letter I received four months ago:

"As one approaches eighty, there is a passionate desire to get at the bottom of things and see why they do not thrive. My neighbor, a famous grower of giant pansies, warns us that plants languish if they are put in pots that are too large. Looking back to the time when, as a child, I listened to Robert Collyer who preached in a theater after the Chicago fire, I realize that the depression of empty seats has left a lasting impression on me. The next impression is of the spasmodic frenzy of building a new church, only to find that faulty planning reduced its efficiency and greatly increased the burden of supporting the undertaking.

"Our Churches, except the traditional meeting-houses appropriated by our ancestors, are badly planned. If Meadville is preparing men to supply new theological wine, why not begin a thorough study of the size, kind, and cost of the container that is to hold that wine.

"I am seeing the *Register* again. It seems to me that the breath of life is creeping into it. Perhaps my florist's theory of reduced pots is a wise one."

THE DEPRESSION OF EMPTY SEATS

AS a matter of fact, I am more sure that the theory of my correspondent about churches that are too big is a wise one, than I am that her pansy-growing neighbor is right in his theory about the effect of flowerpots that are too big. I asked one of our Unitarian ministers, who is also a famous grower of pansies, what he thought about it, and he said it didn't seem to him to make sense. But when it comes to churches, I am prepared to give an unqualified assent. Put a couple of hundred people into a church that seats a couple of thousand, and the result is almost certain to be depressing. Put that same congregation into a church that seats three hundred (or three hundred and fifty on Easter!) and the result is wholly different. I have seen a gleam of unconcealed envy flash in a minister's eye when he heard of a new church with a seating capacity of two hundred, thinking of his own church that is never more than one-fifth filled. Those relentlessly empty pews may once have been occupied by the grandparents of the present generation, but they have been empty for so many years now that even

the beauty of the church cannot atone for their dreary vacuity. How can a man preach with power and inspiration under such circumstances?

VERY YOUNG MINISTERS

YES, we need to face with direct and unflinching courage the plain fact that many of our churches are badly planned with respect to the needs of today. The flowerpots are too big, and the plants languish. When we build new churches, we must be realistic rather than over-enthusiastic.

But there are other applications of this parable of the over-size flowerpots which seem to me more important. For example, there is the young minister just out of the divinity school who is persuaded to undertake a job that is too big for his present abilities. Churches sometimes fall into the delusion that the one requirement for the successful handling of a very difficult church is extreme youth. In most cases, it just doesn't work out; but it has an alluring appeal for discouraged committees. Then, when the young man has been found, the church can use all sorts of arguments to win his consent—arguments that are not always quite *fair*. The outcome isn't always unfortunate, but the risk is tremendous. A very young minister in a church that is too large for him may win a

degree of outward success, but the price may be too great. He may languish in his inner life of the mind and of the spirit, and neither he nor his people may realize what is happening until it is too late to do very much about it.

IT APPLIES TO SERMONS

ANOTHER application may be found in the field of sermon preparation. Many years ago, Mr. Crothers showed me a bulky volume entitled "Seed Thoughts for Preachers", in which (if my memory serves me correctly) there were 10,000 ideas for sermons. It was a very tempting notion, for every minister knows that a good sermon has to start with an idea, and there is a lot of solid comfort in the thought that one has so magnificent a collection at hand in case one's personal supply runs short. But the difficulty arises when an idea is taken out of the book (or out of one's own head, if possible) and planted in a flowerpot. Some seeds are very small, and they belong in very small pots. To take a seed-thought that would do very acceptably for a five-minute talk to children and plant it in a full-length sermon that is supposed to run for half an hour is fatal. The poor little idea languishes, and the people in the pews do likewise. As a matter of

fact, a half-hour sermon requires more than one idea, though some teachers in theological seminaries appear to think otherwise.

WHAT IS A SEMINARY?

THAT word "seminary" is worth stopping to think about for a moment. What does it mean, anyhow? Webster's International Dictionary being within reach, it might be useful to see what so eminent an authority has to say. "Seminary. 1. A piece of ground where seed is sown for producing plants for transplantation; a nursery; a seed plot. 2. Hence, the place or original stock whence anything is brought or produced. 3. A place of education, as a school of a high grade, an academy, college, or university."

It seems to me that definition sheds considerable light on the true nature of a school which is intended to prepare men to be ministers. It is like a nursery—in the horticulturist's sense of that word. It is a place where seeds are planted for the purpose of being later transplanted. It is a place for germinating and sprouting—a temporary and very carefully arranged abiding-place for plants that will grow much better when they have been transplanted. The skill of the nursery man is tested by what happens when the transplanting has been done, when the plants leave the shelter

of the seminary and begin their transplanting, and that's where the importance of the gardener comes in. Not too big a flowerpot at first, and just the right soil, just the right amount of sunshine and watering. It is a tricky business, in which knowledge and experience are both necessary. It won't do for the gardener to try to reproduce nursery conditions in his garden or conservatory. It won't do for the nursery man to try to impose his ideas upon the gardener. And in any case the plants will soon develop their own way of adjusting themselves to new conditions and growing according to their own nature. Nursery man and gardener, separately or together, really play only a small part in the whole business—fortunately!

SO IS A CHURCH, ALSO

A SEMINARY is "a place of education", and that is what a church should be also. A place where education happens, where ideas sprout, where they are nourished and protected until they can stand the ordeal of transplantation—a place where growth is the characteristic sign of life, growth in all the many ways in which human beings grow, but especially growth in wisdom (as distinct from knowledge) and in awareness (as distinct from feverish seeking). Outward growth is not to be ignored or

minimized—are we not told that the Child of Nazareth "increased in wisdom and stature"? But inward growth is by far the more important—growth in spiritual sensitiveness, in the ability to reach clear moral decisions and strong religious convictions, and in the knowledge of the peace of God which passeth understanding.

F. M. E.

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